

Main Article:

Temporary Anchors, Impermanent Shelter: Can the Field of Education Model a New Approach to Academic Work?

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Abstract

Through a discussion of three pedagogical instances--based on classroom discourse, student writing, and program development--the authors examine education as an academic field, arguing that its disciplinary practices and perspectives invite interdisciplinarity and extra-disciplinarity to bridge from the academy to issues, problems, and strengths beyond it. Interdisciplinarity--understood as temporary "groundlessness"--emerges as a means to apprehend and respond to problems that in the context of past frustrations and failures may seem insurmountable; the willingness to not-know inspires new paradigms, experiences, and relationships. Extra-disciplinarity highlights the many chords running between academe and the rest of the world. Using this framework, we discuss the featured pedagogical instances as small-scale models for changing the power structures that have historically silenced some perspectives and knowledges, thus opening these structures to new inputs and connections. We conclude that while this work has no guarantees and is never complete, we must keep trying to connect beyond our academic disciplines and ourselves, both to learn and to more effectively impact the world.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity; power; knowledge; communication; pedagogy; education

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1. Introduction

Would a mariner with good sense and good training paddle a boat into deep waters, then deliberately let go of the oars? The image is derived from Buddhist teaching, where it evokes the concept of seeking *groundlessness* (Trungpa, 1993), an approach to learning that values the release of assumptions and certainties (even if bolstered by previous knowledge or experience) in order to allow for openness to the present moment. In this sense, the process of being educated calls on the capacity both to hold on to and to let go of previous knowledge and experience, in recognition of and service to the unknown. Education must move between groundedness as a discipline and groundlessness as we risk the uncertainty of bridging with other disciplines and with lived experiences.

Here we use the notion of groundlessness to explore the ways in which education as an academic field instantiates and challenges the broader practice of academic work. As educators we focus on the essential connections between what and how people learn, their theories of learning and knowledge, and the ways they live and participate in society (Palmer, 1987). We define education as a limitless journey of inquiry through which, once answers begin to be found (even if the answers are themselves more precise questions), language and structures of thought emerge as relevant, various disciplines are shaped or evoked--and again we drop the oars and give in to worlds beyond known structures, and again take up work in those worlds. Guided by the notion of groundlessness, we explore in this essay the relationship among *disciplinarity*, *interdisciplinarity*, and *extra-disciplinarity* that we see as constituting education as we define, facilitate, and experience it.

A discipline, traditionally defined, is a subject or field of study that is taught. More specifically, according to *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, *discipline* often refers to the "training or experience that corrects, molds, strengthens, or perfects" a particular practice or "behavior in accordance with the rules," that is taught and perpetuated. Academically, disciplinary practices make up, support, and strengthen the primary work of a field of study within a given set of rules. The disciplinary practices of a scientist, for example, include structures for inquiry, methods of experimentation and documentation, and methods for writing up and publishing her findings for other scientists to use. When academic work becomes interdisciplinary, two or more disciplines cooperate or merge to create a practice and/or inquiry that benefits from the practices and

training of the different fields of study (for a comprehensive discussion of the history of disciplinarity, see Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991). When another scientist wants his field to meaningfully interact with other fields to create new understandings, as when he uses philosophy, psychology, and art to explain the theories of physics, he is taking an interdisciplinary approach and broadening his audience (Sefusatti & Hamann, 2005).

Although these academic definitions of discipline and interdisciplinarity are useful in delineating and connecting the specialized work of different fields, the terms thus defined stop short of embodying their potential power; whether communicating and working with folks in one's own or other disciplines, academics still largely remain behind closed doors. Although the occasional academic finding or article may reach people outside academia, much of the work of academia ends up being of, by, and for academia, perpetuating the illusion that "higher" knowledge is the property of those in "higher" education (Cook-Sather & Shore, 2007). We know we are not alone in our restlessness with this model and our desire to see the academy change, to become more capacious, inclusive, and involved in the world (Dalke, Cassidy, Grobstein, & Blank, 2007). We want to see the academy develop and use a discourse and other intentional action structures that bridge the academic with the everyday and, in the words of our colleagues, "increase the much needed engagement between academic activity and broader social and political concerns" (Dalke, Grobstein, & McCormack, 2006, Section 1).

The field of education, as practiced in the joint academic program at Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College, USA, is necessarily multidimensional and bridged with everyday (not formally academic) experience, which we refer to here as *extra-disciplinary*; it has many discourses and structures built in that allow it to connect and effect change beyond the academy. As professors and students of education, we are concerned with how our theories are pulled from and brought back into classrooms and other teaching and learning situations. We insist that one foot is always outside the academy (and often both feet) in order to listen to students, parents, teachers, principals, and policymakers, and work with them meaningfully to support, strengthen, and challenge education as practiced in worlds outside "higher" education.

Fifty years ago, Foshay outlined "The Need for a Discipline of Education," framing some of the salient issues:

We have been misled, by the fact that we borrow most of our commonplace concepts from other disciplines, into believing that education can be no more than a kind of eclectic art like other applied fields. Education is viewed by many educators as a meeting place for coordinate branches of knowledge, but not as a branch of knowledge itself. But every branch of knowledge is just such a meeting place, or synthesis; a discipline of education would be concerned with its particular synthesis. (Foshay, 1957, p. 164)

The particular synthesis we in the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program have developed is as follows. Education in this program is a discipline: We study, interact with, and contribute a theoretical base, we use structures for practicing education with requirements to which students

are expected to adhere, and we expect students to repeat and improve educational practices in their subsequent education courses and experiences. Education here is also interdisciplinary, drawing from disciplines including anthropology, psychology, and sociology, in terms of the kinds of questions we pose and consider, the kinds of language we use in describing and analyzing phenomena, and the ways we seek, construct, and express knowledge. Finally, we see education as extra-disciplinary, explicitly engaging our students and ourselves in drawing from and working with experiences beyond academic disciplines. We use the notion of groundlessness here to express the uncertainty that occurs between being grounded in a discipline and leaving the modes and methods of the discipline to seek a bridge with other disciplines and with our everyday lives. We suggest that this *liminality* (i.e., the state of being groundless, having left the familiar modes of a discipline) is itself crucial to the ways that we construct and use knowledge.

Since we locate ourselves in a particular way within the larger field of education, it is important to clarify our premises. The Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program (where two of us teach and one of us has completed a teacher certification program to teach at the secondary level) shares in the enterprise of progressive education in the United States and opposes the exclusively transmission-oriented approaches to teaching and learning often characteristic of both traditional liberal arts and pre-professional education. Instead, we promote education that is interactive, integrated with experience, culturally responsive, and socially engaged. Our program philosophy is built around three mutually-informing pursuits: the interdisciplinary study of learning as a central human and cultural activity; the investigation of the politics of schooling as a powerful source of personal and societal development; and the preparation of lifelong teachers, learners, and researchers. Students who complete one of the Education Program options are prepared to become leaders and change agents in whatever professional and human activities they pursue.

Our practice follows four interrelated premises: (a) a belief in the necessity of risk to teaching and learning, (b) a fluid, emergent conception of curriculum, (c) the need for multiple modes of address to learners, and (d) informing them all, the call for ongoing resistance to injustice (for a fuller discussion, see Lesnick, Cohen, & Cook-Sather, 2007).

As people who research, teach, learn, and do education in a small US liberal arts college, we regard our discipline as having a large center that includes teacher preparation and interdisciplinary educational studies, and encompassing teacher education, socio-cultural studies of policy and practice, power-sensitive explorations of the intersections of knowledge, language, and authority, and qualitative and community-based research. Centered thus, we work with, hear, and respond to the people and situations we encounter, trusting children and others not typically or historically regarded as learned to teach us and to inform and challenge the academy. We find in education a discipline (intentional, difficult, and, when we are in luck, enlightening) that enables and compels us to move--in imagination and action--between the ground of our discipline to other disciplines and to the rest of the world.

In the next sections, we discuss three instances that allow us to examine education as an academic field: a classroom conversation, a student's perspective on an educational practice, and program development. We begin inside the classroom because for us, the classroom is the laboratory where we explore and seed approaches to teaching and learning. Then we focus on how a student integrates the classroom experience--what sense she makes and what she takes away, as expressed in her final portfolio. Finally, we look at how the classroom can seed a broader college community, which can in turn become a classroom--a space for deliberate teaching and learning. Throughout, we highlight ways that education's disciplinary practices and perspectives invite interdisciplinarity and extra-disciplinarity to bridge from the academy to issues, problems, and strengths beyond. We hold academic work to the standard set by the Dean of Yale's School of Public Health, Paul Clearly, recently when he commented, "If we're so smart, why aren't we helping people more?" (Wortman, 2007).

2. Classroom Conversation

In this section we examine how using classroom conversation to approach education as disciplinary, interdisciplinarity, and extra-disciplinarity can help to address significant problems in the world. I, Jody Cohen, tell a story about Critical Issues in Education, a course that interrogates assumptions about schooling as a way of exploring and questioning the body of knowledge that constitutes, in part, the field of education. Recently, I taught a class that included 2 men and 17 women, 18 traditional students and 1 staff member, and--for our colleges--a notably diverse group in terms of race and class. I recall a conversation halfway through the course. Students had read articles on giftedness (Sapon-Shevin, 1993) and disability as social construction (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). In our program, classroom conversation is a core disciplinary method of teaching and learning, a practice in accordance with the field of study. Here I recount a *fishbowl* conversation, a structure in which those on the inside speak while those on the outside observe and listen. Initially I arrange four chairs in a small circle inside a larger circle of observers. When an observer wants to speak, s/he taps an insider and the two exchange places. I begin by asking students to write on cards a quote, topic, or question they found provocative from the readings, which I would then periodically share. Below, I quote from my teaching journal, recapturing a classroom conversation:

I begin by reading aloud an index card on which a student has quoted from the McDermott and Varenne article: "A disability may be a better display board for the weaknesses of a cultural system than it is an account of real persons" (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 327). Students inside the fishbowl discuss the idea of disability as an example of weakness in society and not necessarily problems in a child; they begin to build an argument that supports this position. Several critique their high schools. A student taps in and returns us to the reality of difference: It is human nature to see differences, children point out differences right away. Someone else suggests that educators could look at differences in terms of ability rather than disability. Could schools resist ranking differences? Another asks, "But how do you as an educator accept differences?"

I interject two comments from their index cards: "How do you address the needs of

kids that are at a higher learning level than the rest of the class if you aren't separating them out?" and "Can tracking be positive? I remember having the best and most challenging moments in my education in honors classes but these articles make me feel like separating students is always negative. How do you reconcile that?"

The mood shifts as conflicting perspectives become evident, perhaps irreconcilable. A young woman of color (G) taps back in: "My high school teacher, this African American guy, he told us it's all a set-up, the testing is a set-up for certain kids to fail. He comes up to me in the hall and asks, 'What do you call an old car?' I say, 'It's a hoopdi.' 'Yeah, me too,' he says, 'but on the tests it's a jalopy.'" Others nod and agree that the odds are stacked against students who display difference.

Students begin tapping in at a faster pace. A young Latino (T) taps in, sits down, leans forward: "You can't neglect those able to work within the system. We're here at these colleges--don't tell me we shouldn't get that special treatment; we're here. Now it's our job to use that to help our community." On the outside the staff member, an older white woman, half rises from her chair, shouting, "Yes, I agree, I work here in Housekeeping in the day and another job too so my children can go to schools like this one." A young Latina (L) who has not spoken until now calls out, also from the outer circle: "But if you tell kids it's set up so they can't succeed, they won't try. We have to take what we have into the future and change how things are." The class is over; the young woman who told the hoopdi story is shaken and still trying to respond to this last speaker. (J. Cohen's teaching journal, November 2, 2006)

The vignette suggests ways that working with education as a discipline, in constant dialogue with interdisciplinary and extra-disciplinary moves and perspectives can provide unexpected pathways and allow for the *not-knowing* that precedes new knowing. Letting go of what we know and how we know it can enable surprising encounters and challenges, leading one "to reconfigure one's way of not only relating to the world, but also fundamentally changing his or her way of perceiving that world as well" (LIFERS Public Safety Steering Committee [LIFERS], 2004, p. 63S). In our program, we carry a set of disciplinary assumptions about how to catalyze, sustain, and deepen classroom conversation: We draw on strategies to structure talk; we expect participants to draw on a range of sources; we encourage participants--including ourselves--to take risks in their thinking; we seek to balance our ideas about what students need to consider with openness to how students encounter the material and each other. For example, although I am uncomfortable with the possibility that students will conclude that ability grouping is helpful, I still chose to share a card that raised that point at what I considered a crucial moment in the dialogue. This vignette demonstrates an effort to ground the conversation in the texts (via participants' cards) and in focused speaking and listening (via the fishbowl structure). It invites risky thinking inside a container that is dialogic.

The ways we facilitate discussion reflect our valuing of multiple perspectives, openness of mind, and deep listening, which entails attending deliberately to others' meanings as ways to co-construct knowledge. With this intent, we call upon carefully composed ways of organizing participants to interact and reflect within the boundaries of a given time and space. Among the structures that we believe promote this kind of talk is the fishbowl. While such strategies are

familiar in other contexts, for us they constitute disciplinary moves intended to demonstrate forms of interaction that model teaching and learning processes. The fishbowl structure was a deliberate way of delimiting focus, opening up exchange, and pushing on the boundaries of strongly-held beliefs. The insertion of texts authored by both published authorities and students provided a mode of intervention through which I could continue to both challenge and scaffold students' thinking.

In education we borrow explicitly from other disciplines, taking up their terminology, kinds of questions, and ways of constructing knowledge. Here I invited students to unravel assumptions about "intelligence" and "disability." This fishbowl conversation drew on the anthropologically and psychologically informed work of "experts" who deconstruct assumptions about knowledge. Since we are working from multiple assumptions, we run the risk of having participants speak but not understand each other. This takes on added significance because the knowledge we are constructing tends to emerge uniquely from how participants take up the materials and each other. Our forfeiting of the rigors of a single disciplinary ground may destabilize our work together, edging us toward groundlessness, "the unconditioned, inexpressible, dreamlike nature of all experience" (Chodron, 2005, p. xii). It may also provoke insight uncluttered by our habitual ways of thinking.

Because it is impossible to accurately predict how we will grapple with content in a given class, or conversely, to report the full import of a class after the fact, deep, receptive listening becomes especially critical. We seek to create a space where students are profoundly engaged--not only with speaking but also with listening, and not only with hearing what is said but also with listening for what goes unsaid. Yet this does not mean that the conversation is consistently rich, focused, and connected; rather, this kind of talk includes comments that are *not* focused, *not* related to one another, *not* sufficiently or clearly grounded in the topics and texts at hand. At times we grope in the dark to locate the gold, those startlingly insightful moments in a conversation. One way of understanding this sometimes deeply uncomfortable situation comes from the Buddhist concept of "resting in alaya" as "the realization that phenomena cannot be regarded as solid, but at the same time they are self-luminous" (Trungpa, 1993, p. 23). This way of looking at the complex and shifting meanings of classroom conversation treats this talk as an experience in time that cannot be completely abstracted or separated from the situation in which it occurred; rather, the interaction makes sense on its own terms, and thus may be regarded not as "solid" but as a "self-luminous" phenomenon in which existence and meaning are simultaneous. It follows then that as teachers, we foster but neither predict nor control our students' thoughts and actions.

The young woman (G) who told the hoopdi story later wrote the following:

I ended up crying after class about the fishbowl. It had gotten so emotional and so deep. I never had something like that happen in a classroom setting.

Another student (R), who had not spoken, mused:

I do remember being engaged in a completely different way during that class. I chose not to relate my own experience because I could tell from the tension in the room that a true sense of learning was occurring; one where the boundaries blurred, where people felt uncomfortable, and where comprehension began to occur.

The fishbowl becomes a container within which participants are invited to abandon preconceived ways of knowing in order to uncover a true sense of learning, one that startles us and blurs our boundaries, perhaps upsets or frightens us into change. “Fundamental changes in personal philosophy . . . are not solely an individual intellectual phenomena and are not complete until they are manifested by personal efforts to transform others . . .” (LIFERS, pp. 63S-64S).

The vignette shows classroom conversation as extra-disciplinary. Because we are all differently positioned--as teachers and learners, parents and children--we bring the questions, priorities, and convictions of our outside lives. These influence not only our content but also how we express ourselves and listen to others. We relate and learn outside the usual methods of discipline. In the fishbowl, students referred frequently to the world outside this classroom. At some point they moved beyond the modulated turn-taking of academic discourse that bell hooks describes as “[middle] class values that teach [students] to maintain order at all costs” (hooks, 1994, p. 179) and into a mode of exchange that included “[l]oudness, anger, emotional outbursts” (p. 178). The extension of both content and mode of expression to participants’ lives outside the classroom lends a resonance. A few weeks after the fishbowl, student G reflects:

I made the comment that because I am a person of color, no one cared about my social experience and how that affects my choices in life. One person had agreed with me, but another then entered and asked, “Then why are we here [at Bryn Mawr and Haverford]?” I noticed I had gotten so emotional I started swearing and yelling to get my point across. Then someone else called out, “Well, if we keep teaching our children to think that they will never succeed they will never try.”

Student R, who had chosen to keep quiet during the fishbowl, later narrated her experience:

I usually participate in a more active way . . . that day I decided to sit back and listen. What [students G, L, and T] each said resonated with me as I had been in each of their positions at one point in my life . . . It was one of the only moments during the entire semester where I could see how the students were pushing each other to a greater understanding about the topic and ultimately themselves without the teacher having to serve as a guide. It was a beautiful thing and I didn’t feel right interrupting something like that.

Student L, who spoke up at the end to challenge student G, shared later that she had not intended to speak and that afterwards she had called her mother to discuss it. Extra-disciplinary learning may occur both in the time and space of the classroom and also in the time and space of our lives beyond classrooms.

Because this kind of learning addresses participants in various roles in their lives, they may cross

boundaries of the classroom in unexpected ways, such as “swearing,” remaining attentive to internal connections, and calling home. Also, when we as facilitators are both deliberate and fortunate, our students may begin “pushing each other to a greater understanding about the topic and ultimately themselves,” because the learning process unravels their assumptions about the world, including the way they live their lives in it.

3. Educational Practices: A Student Perspective

As Jody Cohen’s vignette demonstrates, the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program teaches foundational educational practices that are disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and extra-disciplinary to provide students with meaningful processes and spaces for articulating their ideas. As a student in this program, I, Darla Himeles, had the opportunity to perform several iterations of educational practices, including writing reflectively and analytically, completing creative projects that explored assumptions and issues in education, lesson planning, teaching, and observing in schools. Each practice has been valuable to my development as a thinker, writer, and teacher. Here I will focus on one such practice, a portfolio project I created for the course, Critical Issues in Education, when Alice Lesnick taught it.

In Critical Issues in Education (which is the same course Jody Cohen discusses above), students are challenged to use various critical lenses to examine, and perhaps shift, their perspectives by exploring issues pertaining to social justice, inequity in schools, theories about learning, and their own biases and goals. The coursework, drawing from and pushing beyond the classroom, consists of several reflective papers, an assumption analysis paper, a group-teaching project, and an observation of and set of reflections about a classroom in a local school. The texts and projects we construct are multilayered, challenging, and rich, each explicitly asking us to look critically at ourselves, our schools, and our culture, to ask hard questions, and to take a personal stance--to use an “I” that is authoritative, even as it is also always changing, growing (for further discussion of student authority and recognizing students’ evolving selves, see Cook-Sather, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Dewey, 1938; Duckworth, 1987; Freire, 1998).

The culmination of students’ work in the course is a final portfolio focused on a personally relevant educational theme. The portfolio project is relatively structured, yet it yields as many unique variations as students who attempt it. It provides a moment of reflection and projection on an educational journey that was and will continue to be. My portfolio (Himeles, 2004) asks what it means to be a *historical being*, a term borrowed from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (1998). Specifically, the portfolio explores how Freire’s concept can and does inform various teaching and learning contexts, as well as how my understanding of it informed my own growth over the semester. The portfolio is structured in pairs of artifacts (two-dimensional visual representations of experiences or concepts that are relevant to the narrative that the portfolio constructs) and reflections. Students choose 8 to 10 artifacts from their educational journey and pair them with reflective writing that is both personal and analytical, rooted in experience as well as in texts. An opening essay frames and

contextualizes the portfolio's focus and guiding question(s).

My portfolio's opening essay explores Freire's definition and my understanding of historical being. Like much of the writing we do in education classes, this excerpt presents a theoretical springboard from which my own thoughts leap:

"The teacher who thinks 'correctly' transmits to the students the beauty of our way of existing in the world as historical beings, capable of intervening in and knowing this world" (Freire, 1998, p. 35). . . . It is that capability and that desire to intervene in our world that is so important and so directly follows from knowing oneself as a part of history, both as its result and as its potential changer. Freire reminds us that we are "*conditioned* but not *determined*" and that likewise "the future is *problematic* and not already decided, fatalistically" (Freire, 1998, p. 26). To be a historical being is to understand oneself in the context of all that has been and all that will be. It means understanding that the world is a product of one massive and complex history that mostly remains unwritten and is often misrepresented. It means avoiding neutrality, that "comfortable and perhaps hypocritical way of avoiding any choice or hiding [one's] fear of denouncing justice" (Freire, 1998, p. 101). It means knowing that one has the power, and in fact the duty, to change the expected course of a conversation, a lesson, a business, a government. It means taking risks, making choices, living, teaching, and learning as someone who understands the role implied by "historical being." (Himeles, 2004, pp. 1-2)

Looking back at this essay, I am struck by the way the portfolio itself was historical, clearly contextualized by all that was and would or could be, and by the passion behind my words, a passion that has been refined but never smothered. In this paragraph, I see a microcosm of my "education self" and of the practice of education in general: it speaks of teachers' and learners' mutability, civic duty, the inter- and extra-disciplinary faces of education, and the immensely personal investment one makes when participating in an education program such as this one.

My artifacts were excerpts from relevant conversations I had, pieces my classmates had written, a personal online journal I maintained, a lesson plan I co-composed and co-taught, excerpts from my own essays and reflections, and a brochure about humane education. My reflections, like my opening essay, used the readings as springboards for and complements to my ideas and questions. Through this collecting and reflecting, I learned to articulate the burgeoning teaching and learning passions inside me. I was able to mark a moment of beautiful clarity--a moment in which I had assessed my biases, been thoroughly struck and moved by the force of my chosen theme, and made decisions about my future role as an educator. This documentation has been invaluable to me in my development as a reflective and historical being.

Within the context of this education program, in which so much of our disciplinary work is infused with both interdisciplinarity and extra-disciplinarity, the practice of creating a portfolio is disciplinary. In some ways it resembles the work of other traditional disciplines; there is a theoretical base from which students are encouraged to draw in their writing and practice (as in my opening essay), there is a given structure with guidelines to which students are expected to adhere, and there is an expectation that students will improve their proficiency at the practice in

their subsequent education courses. Also like other disciplines, a student's willingness to engage with these practices meaningfully, that is to reflect on her educational experiences critically, influences whether or not her experience of the discipline will be *transformative* or simply informative.

There are other, less traditional disciplinary qualities to this practice, however. For example, the portfolio, like other educational practices, frees the student from having to be tidy; the "I" used in her writing is changeable--in fact, some of her most transformative writings are those in which she recognizes and analyzes the inconsistencies within herself. The topics she examines can sometimes invoke messy and passionate responses. The disciplinary culture of education acknowledges that the act of being an educator or being educated is of a moment--rooted in time and in a particular time--so the portfolio is recognized as a moment between what was and what will be. As in Jody Cohen's classroom conversations, these moments of transformative stocktaking are never fully reproducible, but they are central to our educational practice. We also consider it disciplinary that the portfolio is perpetually unfinished, just as knowledge, growth, students, schooling, and social climates are perpetually unfinished. Students often consider this *unfinishedness* productive, adding to their portfolios, either by actually adding reflective pairs or by continuing to think about their topics, years after having completed the courses in which they were created.

Finally, the learner's authority is assumed throughout the writing of the portfolio, which is an essential aspect of all disciplinary work in this program. The "I" is in conversation with other "I's" (other writers, teachers, classmates, pre-college students, family, and friends), but allowed to make claims that are its own; it is vested with the authority to speak boldly. This authority is present not only in the student's tone but also in her treatment of other students' authority. As this program promotes social justice, it is a disciplinary norm in our courses that we practice listening to and recognizing students of all ages as sources equally authoritative on their learning experiences to those more traditionally studied (theorists and teachers). It is assumed in our program that an impetus for change and development in schools is found in empowering students to contribute to their schooling on all levels--curriculum, teaching, assessment--so our portfolios cite students and treat them as authorities just as they claim and demonstrate our own authority (for further discussion of our program's context and philosophy, see Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program, 2007; Lesnick, Cohen, & Cook-Sather, 2007).

These moments of clarity, the reflecting and projecting, are when we are grounded, when we feel ourselves at the dock; once on solid ground, we can push out into the open water and risk dropping our oars for the sake of finding groundlessness, the unclear, unstable, and open state between our discipline and interdisciplinarity or extra-disciplinarity in which a lot of the work outside of these clarifying moments exists. The interdisciplinarity of the portfolio comes not only from the educational practices within it that are interdisciplinary (such as ethnography, from anthropology and sociology), but also from the fact that education students at these

colleges must major in a different discipline.

A typical education class brings together multiple disciplinary perspectives, while also intersecting with the subjects younger students study in K-12 classrooms. These varied disciplinary perspectives inevitably shape the portfolios students create. My portfolio was colored by my background in English, as well as by the history class I observed and the sociology and mathematics backgrounds of classmates I cited. Because education is concerned with all classrooms and all disciplines that play a part in school culture, it is inevitable that a comprehensive portfolio would reflect this interdisciplinarity.

Arising from our disciplinary assumption that students are both classroom consultants and authoritative agents of change, the portfolio has an extra-disciplinary foundation that invites and expects students to pull from and push into realms outside the academic. A meaningful anecdote about learning to ride a bicycle or traveling to a new place can be framed as academically relevant in a portfolio reflection even though it is extra-disciplinary. After all, much of the reality of classrooms that appears in portfolios is the stuff of informal conversation and personally colored observation--experiences that are not inherently academic. The portfolio is an invitation to portray a student's journey as a fluid and somewhat unstructured movement between, through, and around the disciplines and experiences that inform her growth. That such legitimization of personal experience alongside the academic can happen in an intensely academic setting like Bryn Mawr or Haverford Colleges demonstrates a form of education that is not tidy, not easily defined as a traditional discipline, but vibrant, complex, and personally (and thus socially) transformative as a practice. This transformation moves us towards being the agents of change that the program hopes us to be.

4. The Empowering Learners Partnership Program

Our complex orientation to disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and extra-disciplinarity shapes our classroom assignments and practices in the ways Jody Cohen and Darla Himeles have demonstrated above. In this section, I, Alice Lesnick, will show how it has also guided us in the creation of a new initiative that connects staff members and students as teachers and learners.

This new model for community building on campus addresses a familiar problem on college campuses: the relations between college students and employees, particularly those in service-oriented positions, are often impersonal and even strained, even while they are in many ways highly visible and ongoing. It is easy to notice that the labor of some people fuels the leisure and opportunity of others and that the reward structures on and beyond campus favor some over others. On our campus, for example, students may earn the same hourly wage as hourly employees supporting families, and everyone knows that such income disparities are poised to grow significantly over the course of an individual's working life. Differences of class and racial/ethnic background are also at play but seldom actively worked through.

Linked but not limited to an undergraduate education course, Empowering Learners: Theory and Practice of Extra-Classroom Teaching, the [Empowering Learners Partnership](#) (ELP) program offers participants a pathway for responding to these problems. With funding from the Mellon Foundation and Bryn Mawr College, USA, the ELP program at Bryn Mawr pairs a student and a staff member as teaching and learning partners in a unique 8-15-week partnership. With the help of ELP program staff (a faculty member and a student coordinator), members of each partnership identify a focal subject to teach and learn. Participants are encouraged to think about their work history, life experience, avocations, and goals as sources of knowledge from which to teach and learn. Partners meet 2 hours weekly, 1 hour per subject, and track their activities, accomplishments, and questions as teachers and learners through weekly written reflections, a weekly discussion (for students), and midcourse and final assessments with program staff.

The goals of the ELP program are to build community and create relationships that connect participants to the educational mission of the College. The College supports participation in the programs through 2 hours' paid release time per week for staff and an hourly wage for students. Students may opt instead to use their program participation as fieldwork in selected education courses. The 27 unique partnerships that have taken place to date have focused on such paired topics as: Greek cooking and research skills, woodcarving and e-mail literacy, fresh fish preparation and Biblical diction and syntax, fundamentals of Islam and computer security and keyboarding, crafts and digital photography, baking and house painting, cooking and Italian language, jazz appreciation and mathematics and reading tutoring for the staff member's daughter, and Bulgarian language introduction and English as a second language.

The ELP program, like Darla Himeles's portfolio and the fishbowl conversation in Jody Cohen's class, integrates disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and extra-disciplinary elements of education. As disciplinary educational work, it is built on the ground of Freire's (1998) articulation of the radical reciprocity and political significance of the teaching and learning relation. The ELP program also builds on disciplinary practices of education such as curriculum and lesson planning, informal writing, and reflective conversation to plan and assess their work. For students seeking to study education, it also offers a unique context to develop teaching skills--through one-to-one, intergenerational work in a setting in which both partners are engaged, but differently.

The ELP also rests on the ground of participants' life experiences and interests, and on their desire (already felt or engaged by the program) to share these. While the ELP does not assume that the knowledge people will share is discipline-based or professionally certified, it does treat this knowledge as legitimate, of potential meaning and use to others, and available to be conveyed deliberately and systematically. As one staff member who is teaching cooking to her student partner explained, cooking can be taught from the bottom-up, beginning with what she considered the four essential sauces, or from the top down, by planning a meal. This framework for thinking about the communication of subject matter grows out of a disciplined approach to

cooking and to teaching cooking, one that applies to a range of cooking situations and learners. At play are questions concerning the learner's grasp of essential tools for inquiry and/or productivity (such as, in cooking, the incremental development of proficiency in the use of a kitchen knife), and the ability to share products with and gain the respect of knowledgeable peers. The program is linked to and sustained by disciplinary knowledge on the part of students, staff, and education professors, as well as being supported by the broader educational goals of the College.

The ELP program is sometimes interdisciplinary in terms of specific studies. For example, this year a student has been learning about Islam from a staff member who is a practicing Muslim. To study with a practitioner--to gain exposure to the texts he consults, to compare religious background and outlook with him over time, and to witness his prayer--constitutes an interdisciplinary approach distinct from studying religion through a college course, with which the student is also engaged.

Further research will be needed in order to substantiate other ways in which I sense that the ELP program is interdisciplinary. In traditional terms, interdisciplinarity exists only within formal academic or professional contexts (see Cook-Sather & Shore, 2007). But the ELP questions the primacy of such contexts; instead, it fosters informal adult education based in the college not as classroom site but as workplace and residence. ELP challenges the meaning of interdisciplinarity by bringing into close relationship areas of study that are primarily conceptual with those concerned with the manipulation of materials.

When a student learns from a staff member how to prepare a fresh fish, she literally learns a series of techniques and ways to solve specific problems; she may then go on to use her knowledge of these procedures to model problem solving in other contexts. For example, a student teaching a staff member how to use e-mail reports that she drew on her experience of learning unfamiliar terminology, equipment, tasks, and processes when she began a work-study job in a campus dining hall. She may also learn something about the life context supporting this knowledge for the staff member, as when the student who studied fish preparation learned about her staff partner's life as a fisherman and his use of fishing as a metaphor for his spiritual life. When a staff member who is a jazz musician teaches jazz appreciation to a student, he teaches her not to play the music but to hear it and look for it (as the staff member did in using [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) as a source of archived performance) in enriched ways; learning to listen from a skilled practitioner may well inform her knowledge of realms other than music, such as history. When a student teaches a staff member how to use e-mail, she teaches him how to manipulate the keyboard and also why such work might be meaningful to him (for instance, to his interest in contemporary music or religious perspectives)--perhaps re-seeing its significance to her as well. In this way, ELP participants experience the ways in which knowledge grows from embodied sources; action is part of knowledge, not simply an occasion for its application.

In order for people to construct knowledge across disciplines, reciprocal, egalitarian, and participatory processes need to be created and supported, both within and beyond the academy. Further research may show that ELP partnerships foster interdisciplinarity by helping participants see how they can share personal knowledge deliberately and systematically with others, thus making it easier for them to own their knowledge and connect it to their efforts to learn and teach.

ELP is also an extra-disciplinary structure that allows campus community members to occupy new roles and relationships as co-teachers and co-learners (Cook-Sather, 2001). This structure exists alongside but not within pre-existing roles, relationships, and structures for work, learning, and communication. ELP stands on disciplinary and experiential grounds to reach out to a more groundless point of possibility and risk in creating new interdisciplinary, interpersonal (extra-disciplinary), and institutional connections.

To clarify the ways in which ELP both draws on and troubles the distinctions between disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and extra-disciplinary dimensions of education, I share here the story of the creation of the mission statement in the Empowering Learners class. As the semester was beginning (in January, 2006), I informed the class that it would be our task to serve as a think tank for the program's development. Alongside other course foci and field placements in tutoring and mentoring settings, my students and I spent several weeks conducting background research and discussing associated issues, needs, and questions. One day in February our seminar room filled with people who usually do not join together in meetings of Bryn Mawr classes: staff members from housekeeping and dining services (the first two departments we worked with), the two Directors of those departments, the College's Associate Information Officer (who also serves as Equal Opportunity Officer), and administrative and faculty colleagues from the Education Program and the Civic Engagement Office. A student (Amanda Root, the first student coordinator of the Empowering Learners Program) led the discussion, beginning by distributing index cards and pencils and asking people to feel free at any time to write down questions and suggestions; I took notes using another student's laptop computer. Our goal was to use the literal words of participants in the official language of the program. One of the most compelling moments in the discussion came as people worked to decide on the specific nouns to describe what people would share in the partnerships: Knowledge? Skills? Hobbies? Life lessons? As one staff member put it:

Now I am beginning to see what you all are talking about: the barter system. There are certain things I am expert at: Black History Month; I love to fish and catch fish; and I am a fisher of men, building relationships. I don't know what you need but down the road we can figure it out.

An Education Program colleague highlighted the challenge of claiming authority to teach: "I wouldn't think to advertise myself as someone who knows about something until an expressed need comes up." The staff member who was also a student in the class commented, "Everyone

has something unique to offer even if it is not a talent. Talent is a scary word.” Several participants said we needed to convey the excitement people felt about areas they care about without reinforcing hierarchies of expertise with language that sounded primarily formal or academic. What evolved through this conversation was the mission statement: The Empowering Learners Partnership (ELP) program seeks to foster empowering relationships that cultivate and celebrate the knowledge, talents, skills, and passions of Bryn Mawr College staff and students.

The words *talents* and *passions* come from this discussion, in which people clearly marked out space for investments not typically invited in workplaces or in academe. In an environment in which excellence is often linked to disciplinary rigor, exclusiveness, and striving, it was enlivening to imagine it in a more egalitarian way.

The group also made a distinction between our mission to create transformative reciprocity and one more oriented to more familiar models and the more common model of community service (Anderson, 2003). As one participant explained, “This is not community service but community participation.” In our conception, all participants would both serve and be served as all are both in need of assistance and capable of giving it. The goals of ELP emerged as follows:

To bring together Bryn Mawr College staff and students in reciprocal partnerships through which each individual has the opportunity to teach and learn.

To build community and create inclusive opportunities to learn that connect all members of the Bryn Mawr College campus community to the educational mission of the College.

The mission statement and goals of the Empowering Learners Partnership--like the program itself--were the product of a collaborative, cross-contextual process. I am hopeful that ELP will continue to grow and develop in this way on campus, drawing on and changing disciplinary roles (teacher, learner) and acts (lesson planning, reflective writing, conversation), building interdisciplinary bridges between people’s knowledge and needs, and creating unforeseen roles, relationships, and understanding.

5. Conclusion

A decade ago, the dean of Bryn Mawr College articulated the College’s mission: “While we don’t prepare students for any particular job or life, we enable them to bring broad vision and deep understanding, not quick or simple solutions, to their own problems and to the problems of the world around them” (Tidmarsh, 1997, p. 6). Seen a decade later from the perspective of the Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program, this mission seems to us of great value, but we also query the conditions under which we--and other institutions--might accomplish such a far-reaching and worthy goal. Tidmarsh suggests, “This kind of education requires solitude, quiet, freedom from everyday responsibilities, easy access to faculty, libraries, fellow students . . .” (p. 6). Our work in classrooms and outside them suggests that several other conditions are necessary to meet the increasingly complex challenges we face. We suggest two: a revision of how

disciplines are structured and how they sit in relation to one another inside the academy, and a reconsideration of how the academy sits in relation to the “problems of the world.” In the terms of this essay, we ask for a reconsideration of the roles of both interdisciplinarity and extra-disciplinarity.

We acknowledge that the disciplines as traditionally conceived offer us methods for gaining “deep understanding” of phenomena, not only in the classroom and laboratory but also in the “outside world.” To take a current example, in 2001 scientists at Louisiana State University, USA, “modeled hundreds of possible storm tracks,” predicted Hurricane Katrina, the storm that occurred in August of 2005, and predicted its impact on the natural and human-made worlds on the Gulf Coast region of USA as well as on human beings (Fischetti, 2001, p. 3). Clearly this understanding was not used to prepare the country for the coming disaster. Science and policy, knowledge and power were not coordinated in order to serve, or protect, the public good. Although this example may seem to be a leap, we see it as a powerful example of the wide-ranging implications of the issues we discuss here. The power dynamics evident in this disconnect resemble and derive from those that have historically kept disciplines (and human relationships) rigidly defined and seemingly self-contained. If the work of education is to position ourselves as historical beings, as Darla Himeles’s portfolio suggests, then it is also to question the historical context as to how and why people in power have not had, sought, or used the full range of relevant perspectives and knowledges.

Another necessary piece of this work is to challenge the binary thinking that gets us stuck on who does or does not have the voice and the right to impact history. Jody Cohen’s fishbowl conversation and Alice Lesnick’s mission for the Empowering Learners Partnership program suggest two small-scale models for changing the power structures that historically have silenced some perspectives and knowledges, thus opening these structures to new inputs and connections. This work has no guarantees and is never complete, yet we must keep trying to connect beyond our academic disciplines and ourselves, both to learn and to more effectively impact the world (for a discussion of the relevance of such connection, integration, and communication in the sphere of public health, see Neuhauser, Richardson, Mackenzie, & Minkler, 2007).

How should we contend with the alarming abyss between the academy’s knowledge and the real world devastation after Hurricane Katrina? We believe that disciplinary knowledge needs to expand its boundaries to allow for interdisciplinary and extra-disciplinary knowledge to come into play. Although *Webster’s New International Dictionary* (2nd ed., unabridged) informs us that the definition of *discipline* as “a subject of study or a branch of knowledge” is archaic, we in the academy continue to structure ourselves according to disciplines. Many of us in all fields have begun to recognize that the capacity to develop a “broad vision” (Tidmarsh, 1997, p. 6) will require thinking outside disciplinary boxes. Surely, rebuilding the Gulf Coast requires interdisciplinary understandings in both ways we have examined here. Not only is environmental science itself an interdisciplinary field, but also we need frameworks from sociology,

psychology, economics, and political science, among others, in order to make sense of what happened, people's experiences, and what is needed and viable now. Interdisciplinarity understood as temporary groundlessness is also essential, as we seek fresh ways to apprehend and respond to problems that in the context of past frustrations and failures may seem insurmountable. It is the willingness to not-know that inspires new paradigms, experiences, and relationships.

Extra-disciplinarity highlights the many chords running between academe and the rest of the world. Commentary on the hurricane again makes a case in point:

Pielke [a scientist at the University of Colorado, USA] argues that . . . “There’s a real challenge of making knowledge useful. It is not something that the academic community is engaged in as a matter of policy.” His plea is echoed by van Heerden [another scientist]: “Academia gives more credit for journal publications than for helping a hospital prepare for a crisis.” (Reichhardt, Check, & Marris, 2005, p. 176)

We need communication and reward structures both within the academy and among policy-makers and communities so that the knowledge of academics has efficacy and impact. Likewise, academics' knowledge and modes of inquiry must be infused with the conditions, questions, and knowledge of those outside academe. We need to re-imagine the nature of academic knowledge-to grasp that its value is not a measure of its abstraction or supposed transcendence or distillation of experience, but instead is and must be part of and party to experience in all of its forms.

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